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Relational interaction and embodiment: Conceptualizing meanings of LGBTQ+ activism in digital China

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Abstract

This article theoretically and empirically explores meanings of recent activism practised by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other non-heterosexual groups (LGBTQ+) in China. Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals, like the majority of Chinese citizens, are generally self-restrained in popular contention because of the political risks involved. They also face widespread discrimination from the public when revealing their LGBTQ+ identities. This article is concerned with the perceived meanings of Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals suppressing engrained self-constraint to promote LGBTQ+ contention and certain level of collective action. Theoretically, I conceptualize Chinese LGBTQ+ protests as relational interactions undertaken by LGBTQ+ individuals with other people of queer identities (ingroup members), authorities and the public based on the logic of connective action. I also explore the concepts of embodiment and online embodiment to understand individuals' sensual experiences during LGBTQ+ contention. Empirically, I examine university student Qiu Bai's lawsuits with the Education Ministry and her social media campaign against homophobic textbooks. Drawing on in-depth interviews and textual analysis, the case study provides a dialectical account of individuals' experience of embodiment and self-constraint.

Keywords

Activism, China, connective action, embodiment, LGBTQ+, relational interaction

The Chinese LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other non-heterosexual identities) movement in recent years has demonstrated dynamics and agendas that depart from Western LGBTQ+ movements. LGBTQ+ issues have been mostly self-contained in the Chinese society and not considered to impose a significant political threat to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. However, young LGBTQ+ activists in recent cases, despite persistent political restriction, have been able to create new forms of contention and promote

alternative discourses that challenge traditional gender norms in the Chinese society.

This research theoretically and empirically explores meanings of recent Chinese LGBTQ+ activism. I explore the Chinese political context of LGBTQ+ activism and social discrimination of sexual and

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gender minorities in China and conceptualize LGBTQ+ activism as relational interactions undertaken by LGBTQ+ activists with other people of queer identities (ingroup members), the authorities and the public. Relational interaction on digital networks is effectively enabled by a framework of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013), through which individuals pursue the form of sociality that helps establish and maintain their relations within the particular social context. Against the backdrop of political risk and discriminating public attitudes, I propose to understand individuals' sensual experiences during collective action through the concept of embodiment. The concept of embodiment, as it applies to this article, is concerned with people's online and offline experience in protesting a social issue collectively with others while revealing individual emotions. What really matter for the individuals, in this sense, are their perceived personal responsibility as a relational being in the society and their sensual experience during collective action.

Empirically, I study the case of the university student Qiu Bai's (pseudonym) battles against homophobic university textbooks. Between March 2015 and October 2016, Qiu Bai sued the Chinese Ministry of Education (*Zhongguo Guojia Jiaoyubu*) four times, attempting to hold the Ministry of Education accountable for university textbooks describing homosexuality as a mental disorder. Despite the ultimate failure of the cases, the campaign that she initiated against homophobic textbooks mobilized discourse about LGBTQ+ rights online and is regarded as a significant case in China's growing gay rights movement (The Guardian, 2016; Kaiman, 2015). In addition to textual analysis on Qiu Bai's campaign posts as the primary research method for this case study, I conducted in-depth interviews with Qiu Bai in October 2016 and April 2019 to explore the perceived meanings of Qiu Bai and her followers relating to the campaign.

The political and social context for Chinese LGBTQ+ activism

The relationship between Chinese LGBTQ+ communities and the authorities has been in flux over years. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976),

homosexuality in China was condemned as a baleful influence from Western capitalism. In the decade that followed, many homosexuals were jailed on the grounds of 'hooliganism' (Cao & Lu, 2014). However, since the late 1980s, the Chinese government, intending to implement its AIDS prevention strategies but having difficulty getting in touch with anonymous gay communities, has taken a cooperative approach to working with LGBTQ+ non-governmental organization (NGOs) (Hildebrandt, 2012). Homosexuality was decriminalized in 1997 and was removed from the list of mental illnesses in 2001. LGBTQ+ organizations were, to some extent, allowed to develop. However, LGBTQ+ people still receive unequal rights in issues such as marriage, housing, employment and so on (E. Y. Zhang, 2011).

Tongzhi, the Chinese term for the queer identity, was introduced to mainland China in the early 2000s, following the lead of key LGBTQ activists in Hong Kong (Bao, 2018). *Tongzhi* was historically a term adopted in China's republic revolution and later by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to address party members and all people who supported the communist ideals. The adoption of this term by LGBTQ+ individuals endeavours to consciously politicize an identity that embodies the revolutionary spirits of radical activism, speaking to the historical spirits of equality, egalitarianism and collectivism for revolution (Bao, 2018). Therefore, Hongwei Bao (2018) suggests 'queer comrades' as an analytical lens for understanding the Chinese identity of *tongzhi*. The exploitation of the term *tongzhi* in the Chinese context is deliberately political and performative.

However, for more than a decade, the revolutionary spirits of *tongzhi* did not effectively translate into a social movement. Queer identity has mainly existed as an individual-based identity in the private domain. Many Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals still prefer to live in heterosexual families while secretly pursuing homosexual relationships (E. Y. Zhang, 2011). In neo-liberal China, queer endorsement has appeared frequently as part of the commercial culture. Yet, Chinese LGBTQ+ groups have rarely risked confronting the government and seldom tried to influence the political agenda or policy making in demanding more rights. Legitimate channels for collectively raising relevant issues remain largely unexplored.¹ More critically, the

government orientates sensitive political discourse emerging within LGBTQ+ communities, particularly contention around human rights. Cao and Guo's (2016) case study gives one example of the operation framework of a prominent Chinese LGBTQ+ grassroots organization named *Shen Lan*. On the basis that the government would grant some degree of tolerance towards the organization if the organization assists the government with its social welfare obligations, *Shen Lan* has been operating largely within the public health framework since its establishment in 2004 in the northern port city of Tianjin and has refrained from any democratic claim-making or controversial speeches (Cao & Guo, 2016).

The Chinese government also exercises general control over the development of LGBTQ+ organizations through deciding who receives financial support. Local governments are responsible for designating state funding to LGBTQ+ organizations. International funding from private donors or international NGOs is also directed through government agents to reach Chinese LGBTQ+ organizations. A good relationship is desired by both the government and LGBTQ+ organizations to maintain reciprocity, although the state obviously plays a dominant role in this relationship. This means that there is a fine line between CCP's tolerance or even support for LGBTQ+ activities and suppression of them.

The media representation of the attitudes of Chinese authorities towards LGBTQ+ communities remained ambiguous in the first two decades of the millennium. The banning of the Hollywood film *Brokeback Mountain*, which featured a gay romance between cowboys, in 2015 attracted attention from domestic and international media. In December 2015, two television industry associations issued guidelines that made televised portrayals of homosexuality taboo (CTPIA, 2015). Films with LGBTQ+ themes are very seldom shown in Chinese cinemas.² The inequality experienced by Chinese sexual and gender minorities in China has attracted significant international attention, such as that from the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2018). The Chinese government has recently accepted the

UN Human Rights Council's recommendations on LGBTQ+ rights in China for the first time, including adopting legislation banning discrimination within a year (M. Taylor, 2019). However, some observers have expressed scepticism on the implementation of the recommendations, particularly that the UN recommendations received little coverage on Chinese domestic media and that the Chinese government claimed that it had already implemented the recommendations, despite there being no existing law in China prohibiting sexual and gender discrimination in China (M. Taylor, 2019).

Not only does the relationship between Chinese LGBTQ+ groups and the state remain ambiguous, their relationship with the general public is also elusive in the China of modernity and globalization. On the one hand, the political punishment for homosexuality in the Maoist era left cultural legacies that are detrimental for the formation of an accepting mindset of Chinese public towards LGBTQ+ people. In the mid-1980s, homosexuals were widely blamed for the spread of AIDS in China (Cao & Lu, 2014). Stereotypes of LGBTQ+ people have also been somewhat reinforced in recent years by commercial forces, which promote the visibility of gay people as a novelty to attract attention at the expense of misrepresenting LGBTQ+ identities (Cao & Lu, 2014). On the other hand, the Internet has promoted visibility of the international gay movement, particularly on Chinese social media, which has started to inform Chinese people of human rights issues around LGBTQ+ identities.

A national survey conducted by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in late 2015, involving more than 30,000 Chinese respondents, reveals mixed public opinions regarding acceptance of LGBTQ+ in China. The overwhelming majority of respondents agreed on homosexual 'depathologization' and felt that sexual and gender minorities should be treated equally (UNDP, 2016). However, over one in five respondents agreed with gender binary ideas and showed some gay-related HIV stigma. Only one-third of the respondents did not mind getting close to a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI) person or think that sexual and gender minorities are fit to raise children (UNDP, 2016). This shows that the attitudes of Chinese public towards sexual and gender

minorities are in transition, with homosexual stereotypes being slowly removed and inequality and exclusion of LGBTQ+ remaining serious (UNDP, 2016). The gradually changing attitude of the public may have encouraged Chinese LGBTQ+ groups' recent demands for more respect and rights; gaining public support is essential for necessary legal improvement.

Activism of Chinese LGBTQ+ youth

Since 2012, Chinese queer youth and the new generation of feminist activists, who have been influenced by feminist intellectuals and Western queer practices, have demanded more queer and women's rights, despite tightened political control (Bao, 2018; Wang & Liu, 2020). Some individuals have recently launched legal cases challenging the court, which have arguably tested the authorities' boundary of tolerance for the publicity of LGBTQ+ issues. For example, the Chinese film maker Fan Popo in 2015 successfully lodged the case with the Chinese State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT, *Guojia Guangbo Dianshi Zongju*) regarding the removal of his 2012 film *Mama Rainbow*, a LGBTQ+ documentary, from the Internet (Child, 2015).³ In another example, 26-year-old Sun Wenlin, who attempted to marry his same-sex partner but was refused in 2015, sued the civil affairs bureau in the city of Changsha (Hunan province), making it the first legal case of same-sex marriage in China. Despite eventual failures of these cases, having the opportunities for the cases to be heard in the court was itself regarded as victory for Chinese LGBTQ+ people (Wee, 2016). This article also examines the case of the university student Qiu Bai suing the Chinese Ministry of Education in an attempt to hold them accountable for university textbooks describing homosexuality as a mental disorder. The successful lodging of these lawsuits implies that the government is willing to show certain levels of tolerance on individual cases. However, when collective action is involved, activism on LGBTQ+ issues is more likely to be suppressed by the Chinese government because of its potential of wide social mobilization that may be deemed a threat to the government. Qiu Bai's case, as will be demonstrated in section 'Relational interaction and embodiment – case study of Qiu Bai's

campaign against homophobic textbooks', is an example of relatively free development until it reached a high level of collective social support and international attention.

Collective action involves intensive demonstration of solidarity between actors and is a core component of social movements (DellaPorta & Diani, 1999). Classic social movement theories in political science articulate that individuals, through the political process of organizational gathering, make associations and act on representing group interests to reveal aspirations and a unifying belief (Tilly, 1984). Structural changes of the political system often indicate political opportunities for social change and inspire activists to exploit all available resources, such as collective identity, to promote association and collective action (McAdam, 1996; Meyer, 2004; Tarrow, 1998; V. Taylor & Whittier, 1992). As Tilly (2004) elaborates through the notion of 'WUNC display', movements display worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment. However, the existence of a political opportunity is subjectively interpreted, relying on activists' recognition of a structural opening and the possibility to exploit it for promoting social change (Meyer, 2004; O'Brien & Li, 2006). In the realities of Chinese social mobilization, it would be hard for individuals to collectively recognize political opportunities. More importantly, LGBTQ+ activists in China need to manage the public display of collective action more sophisticatedly to avoid overwhelming state suppression. Collective resistance in digital China, instead of demonstrating the rationality of organization and commitment, is often emotive and forged by individual spontaneity (Chen, 2020). The practice of resistance embodies the dialectic fusion between Chinese individuals' promotion and constraints of political contention at the same time (Chen, 2020). Therefore, I propose to understand recent LGBTQ+ collective action in China through examining, first, the logic of connective action in the digital environment (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013) and, second, individual processes of subjectivity during collective action.

Chinese social media have arguably facilitated spontaneous participation of Chinese people in collective action based on *the logic of connective action*. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013) argue for a

theoretical framework of connective action for understanding personalization of political messages and self-motivated sharing of ideas by people on digital networks. During processes of peer production of ideas and messages, communication becomes the organizing agent itself; this departs from traditional collective action that requires top-down centralized organization. Given that public contention in China, even online, bears potential real-life political punishment (Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009; Zittrain & Edelman, 2003), it is meaningful that digital networks enable Chinese people to participate in online contention within a more flexible and personalized framework. The risks involved in online contention require conscious decision-making around participation by Chinese individuals, and the logic of connective action allows Chinese people to have more personal management of the risks. While Chinese people often contest an event or individual online, most of them do not confront the party system or challenge the state (Chen, 2020).

Connective action facilitates individual processes of subjectivity. This article proposes that individual subjectification during LGBTQ+ activism should be examined through the concepts of relational interactions and embodiment, which will be discussed in the next two sections, respectively. The meanings of Chinese LGBTQ+ activism through connective action depart from traditional political resistance that confronts the state, or in the Chinese context challenges local authorities (Cai, 2010). The Chinese LGBTQ+ emancipation movement at the current stage articulates the collective demand for the LGBTQ+ identity, a demand addressing LGBTQ+ counterparts, authorities and the whole of society. In many cases of LGBTQ+ collective action in current China, mobilizing social discourses of queer identity and rights consciousness is an end rather than the means. Elisabeth Engebretsen's (2015) study on Pride politics in China shows that Chinese queer activists reappropriate the notions of pride and visibility in their local contexts to articulate rights discourses, and in this way, they strategically prioritize building rapports with LGBTQ+ allies and the general public rather than political confrontation directed at the authorities. Indeed, action as symbolic representation, the thesis proposed by Bourdieu

and Wacquant (1992), is also pertinent in the Chinese context of LGBTQ+ activism in that the political meanings of LGBTQ+ activism in China somewhat reside in its performative construction and representation of a collective identity. The next two sections examine the concepts of relational interaction and embodiment to explore the LGBTQ+ activists' perceived meanings of activism.

Understanding Chinese LGBTQ+ collective contention as relational interaction

This article follows Van Zomeren's (2015) ideas of collective action as relational interaction to conceptualize Chinese LGBTQ+ protests as relational interactions undertaken by Chinese LGBTQ+ people with LGBTQ+ peers (ingroup members), authorities and the Chinese public. In Van Zomeren's (2015) proposal to understand how a non-activist becomes an activist, individuals participate in collective action in order to regulate the relational models they are involved in, which are attached to particular taboos (what an ingroup or outgroup member should not do) and obligations (what an ingroup or outgroup member ought to do).⁴ When feeling that taboos underlying the relationships are violated, or obligations not implemented, they interact, through collective action, with ingroup members and outgroup, authorities or the system to change existing relational models or reject the relationships altogether (Van Zomeren, 2015). Collective action is in this sense relational interaction; participants collectively act to regulate social relationships.

This conception is built upon Fiske's (1992) theorization of four psychological models for sociality, namely, communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching and market pricing. In communal sharing, people share resources and solidarity within the group. In authority ranking, people accept a linear ordering of power hierarchy, which revolves around control by superior power over submissive groups, as well as expectations of the superior power to provide lower ranking group protection and care. In equality matching, people ensure balance between each other in relation to autonomy, power, benefits and so on. In market pricing, people calculate individualist values

of themselves and others, and orient to ratio values (Fiske, 1992). Political protests often take place when the balance of existing authority ranking is disrupted or considered to be disrupted (e.g. authorities or the system do not implement the care expected by the public) and people move from null relationships to the relational model of communal sharing and act together to modify or reject the authority ranking (Van Zomeren, 2015).

The model of relational interaction provides a useful lens for analysing Chinese LGBTQ+ activism, particularly in the context of continuous reshaping of the relationships between Chinese LGBTQ+ communities with ingroup and outgroup members. It is fair to say that a stable relationship of communal sharing between LGBTQ+ people in China has not been allowed to develop because of the political and social context discussed above. Individual circumstances of LGBTQ+ people, particularly family expectations and educational background, constrain their relationships with each other in a market pricing model. However, recent LGBTQ+ contentious events provide opportunities for the relationship of communal sharing between LGBTQ+ people to forge. Alternative media platforms such as *Blued* (*Dan Lan*), a Chinese gay social network app launched in 2012 and with a current userbase of 27 million, has facilitated heated discussions about human rights of LGBTQ+ people in recent events and promoted recognition of the LGBTQ+ identity within the LGBTQ+ community, although with considerable limitations compared to Western societies (Cao & Lu, 2014).

Outside LGBTQ+ communities, the fluid relationships of LGBTQ+ groups with authorities and the public, as discussed above, require LGBTQ+ groups to frequently adjust the relational models they are involved in. The systemic lack of legal protection for LGBTQ+ rights indicates a high chance of taboo violation that may break the perceived balance of these relationships. Although the Chinese state has successfully managed its frontstage performance of taking care of human rights for Chinese people (Wang & Liu, 2020), LGBTQ+ activists, in particular cases, demonstrate that the authorities fail to enact and implement policies that affect them. Activists intend to break the perceived balance of

relationships and raise rights consciousness of LGBTQ+ people and queer supporters from the public. Specifically, perceived unsupportive attitudes of the authorities, as revealed, for example, in authorities' responses to complaints lodged by LGBTQ+ members, may damage the underlying protocol of authority ranking and become a cause for people to review and reject the existing relationship with authorities, thus engaging in relational interactions with them. Witnessing such cases, LGBTQ+ people may strengthen their peer relationships (moving to the relational model of communal sharing) to collectively demonstrate the queer identity. In short, they reject the damaged relationships with the authorities and the public and seek to re-establish new outgroup relationships. In recent cases that involved the court, LGBTQ+ activists also hoped to mobilize sympathetic supporters from the public by exposing the state's manipulation of the legal system behind the scenes. Exposures of the misconduct of the court and the faults of the Chinese legal system mobilize the wider public by breaking their perceived balance of relationships between the state, the court and citizens.

The logic of connective action, as discussed in the previous section, promotes unprecedented opportunities for activists' mobilization and implementation of relational interaction. LGBTQ+ activists have increasingly adopted the technique of art performance, or *artivism* (a term first adopted by Di Wang, see Wang and Liu, 2020), to, on the one hand, effectively disguise their activism and, on the other hand, efficiently attract the social gaze, breaking through on crowded social networks. Di Wang and Sida Liu's (2020)'s study provides a well-grounded account of the successful adoption of art performance by Chinese feminist and legal activists that has disrupted the state's frontstage performance on gender and legal issues. Using Erving Goffman's theorizing framework of performativity, Wang and Liu argue that the Chinese state carries out careful impression management backstage and sets the boundary that shields backstage activities. In doing so, it defines individuals' interpretation and location of social norms based on the state's frontstage performance. Drawing on Judith Butler's thesis of meaning-making and construction of norms in performativity,

Wang and Liu also argue that feminist and legal activists subversively alter gender norms and perceptions of rights through their artful activism in the way that the provoking presentations of performances often disrupt the repetition and reproduction of state-regulated social ordering.

Similarly, LGBTQ+ activists often resort to art performance to provoke social responses and mobilize other LGBTQ+ people who may remain silent about their identity. On social media, they demonstrate sensational appeals and distribute offline protest videos and images to create spectacles. They intend to mobilize discourses that depart from the traditionally normative perceptions of queer identities in the Chinese society. The artistically performative feature of LGBTQ+ activism demonstrates the non-destructive intention against the regime and has arguably created a shield protecting the activism itself, thus reserving certain space for continuous activism before mobilization becomes a threat to state regulation. The art performance normally centres on a small number of individuals, effectively disguising the collective efforts made by people behind the scenes of the performance and the collective gaze that the artistic presentation has the capacity to attract. Relying on creative and non-confrontational techniques, LGBTQ+ individuals have been able to promote a certain level of interaction to continuously reshape social relationships.

Experience of embodiment and online embodiment in LGBTQ+ campaigns

The high political and personal risks involved (e.g. the risks of detention or being forced to ‘come out’) in promoting LGBTQ+ relational interactions through, for example, publicly demonstrating support for LGBTQ+ activism invoke the question of what the perceived meanings of LGBTQ+ contention are when individuals suppress engrained self-constraint to promote contention. A stronger will of expression is needed for Chinese people to overcome political concerns, and so exploring the sentimental dimension of individual action is particularly meaningful here (Chen, 2020). If the framework of connective action on digital networks, as discussed

earlier, highlights the personalized and self-motivated characteristics of activism, the concept of embodiment provides useful intervention in examining how individuals become emotionally engaged and therefore self-motivated (Chen, 2020). Embodiment in collective action is concerned with individuals’ sensual experience rather than rationality and intention (McDonald, 2006). Kevin McDonald argues that participants in collective global movements experience inter-corporeality (e.g. the exhaustion of participation and recovery), during which they individually encounter their vulnerable selves. He calls embodiment the ‘grammar of action’ (McDonald, 2006, p. 17), which connects people’s physicality and subjectivity, as well as their own subjectivities with the subjectivities of others during collective action, hence the ‘embodied intersubjectivity’ (McDonald, 2006, p. vi).

Experience of embodiment during protests is critically related to people’s expression of moral outrage; recalling memories of the issues at stake during collective action enables sensational transition from fear to laughter, doubt to pleasure (Barker, 2001; Wood, 2001). In traditional collective action taking place on the street, performative rituals during protests amplify emotions; this is the process that Juris (2008, p. 65) calls ‘affective solidarity’. In the personalized framework of connective action on digital networks, the concept of online embodiment requires examination. I have contested elsewhere the idea of disembodiment of online action, arguing that the sensual experience of embodiment is not lessened in the digital environment compared to physical gatherings (Chen, 2020). Online bodies materially symbolize sociological and cultural elements attached to individuals and thus are not detached from people’s offline identities (Balsamo, 1995). What exists when people use technologies to participate in contention is not a virtual body, but what Jordan (2013, p. 85) calls ‘bodily duality’ that is a cultural construct by both the real body and the online avatar as agency of culture. Technologies help configure people’s sensory experience and enable bodies to engage with the world (Boellstorff, 2010; Coté, 2010). Experience of embodiment in the digital environment is still the process that connects people’s memories, emotions, the self and

culture. Despite emerging in private space (i.e. using phones or computers in isolation), humans are habitually *relational beings* who participate in a confluence of relationships (Gergen, 2009). Gergen (2009) argues that people's action is 'relationally embodied action' that contributes to the ongoing process of culture (p. xx). This study therefore argues that the emotions experienced by Chinese LGBTQ+ people, engrained in the culture that constitutes their relationships with others, are no less effective in the online setting.

The lack of both legal protection and public acceptance of sexual and gender minorities, over many years, silences Chinese LGBTQ+ groups' complaints about inequality and suppresses their expression of identity. The sealed emotions and memories can be rich resources for the mobilization of embodiment. Exploration of embodiment and meanings of people's action has to consider not only the moments of action but also how the latent network has been facilitated during daily communications to prepare for the moments (Melucci, 1996).

Embodiment is best examined through particular case studies of individual experience. The next section provides a case study of Qiu Bai's campaign against homophobic textbooks to empirically examine the meanings attributed by LGBTQ+ activists to their collective contention.

Relational interaction and embodiment – case study of Qiu Bai's campaign against homophobic textbooks

During 2015 and 2016, Qiu Bai, a homosexual university student, initiated four lawsuits against the Chinese Ministry of Education (*Zhongguo Guojia Jiaoyubu*), in which she attempted to hold the Ministry of Education accountable for university textbooks describing homosexuality as a mental disorder. Her lawsuits and campaign were self-publicized on her Weibo page and a WeChat public account ('*Qiu Bai de ziyou ye*') that she registered (Qiu Bai, interview, October 20, 2016).⁵ Back in 2013, Qiu Bai moved from her rural hometown to the metropolitan city of Guangzhou to study Creative

Media at Sun Yat-sen University, one of China's top universities. The freshman was intrigued by her own sexuality and frequently attended LGBTQ+ events in the city, but she was soon disturbed by social media messages exposing the problematic language used in textbooks relating to LGBTQ+ topics. Having learnt that homosexuality was removed from the list of mental disorders in 2001, Qiu Bai felt outrageous to discover from an NGO survey that 42 out of 90 psychiatry and psychology textbooks still classified homosexuality as a disease and 12 out of 17 textbooks published after 2001 claimed that homosexuals could be 'cured' (Qiu Bai, interview, October 20, 2016).

Qiu Bai first raised the issue with university officials but was ignored. She then appealed to the Department of Education of Guangdong Province (*Guangdongsheng Jiaoyuting*) (Guangzhou is the capital of Guangdong Province), the General Administration of Press and Publication (*Xinwen Chubanshu*) and the Guangdong Higher Education Publishing House (*Guangdong Gaodeng Jiaoyu Chubanshe*), all of which denied responsibility for the content of textbooks. She then sued the Guangdong Higher Education Publishing House but was rejected. She wrote to the Ministry of Education to ask about the regulation of textbooks but received no response (Qiu Bai, interview, 20 October 2016).

The desperation for a response from authorities finally drove Qiu Bai to sue the Ministry of Education for non-response in March 2015, and the case was accepted by the court. However, just before the trial was held, Qiu Bai was persuaded by two education officers to drop her case. The officers acknowledged the responsibility of Ministry of Education for dealing with problematic textbooks and asked Qiu Bai to submit her appeals to the Appeals Office at the ministry. Qiu Bai did not have much hope of winning the case; she was simply seeking a dialogue with the education officers around the textbook issue, and for this reason, the settlement suggested by the education officers seemed reasonable (Shen & Hunt, 2015). Following this, Qiu Bai used Weibo and WeChat blogs to call for university students to write to the Appeals Office of the Ministry of Education. Reportedly, more than 80 university students followed Qiu Bai's instigation and wrote to the Appeals

Office, but they received not a single reply. Many of the letters were returned (Qiu Bai, interview, 20 October 2016). Qiu Bai felt disappointed that the promise made by the education officers failed to materialize. In April 2016, for the second time, Qiu Bai sued the Ministry of Education for administrative inaction. The case was rejected.

In June 2016, her lawsuit was finally accepted in her third attempt. In the court, she was told that the textbook content did not infringe on her rights. She argued that, as a homosexual required to use the books, they offended her directly. The representatives from the Ministry of Education declined to provide a response. Qiu Bai was frustrated that the Ministry of Education ‘had, once again, got away with not responding to the homophobic textbook issue’ (Qiu Bai, interview, 20 October 2016). However, the 18 months of campaigning had made her realize that continuing to sue the Ministry of Education may be the only way of provoking a response from the authorities (Qiu Bai, interview, 20 October 2016). She wrote in an article she posted on WeChat after the trial,

I must make the Ministry of Education aware that there will always be students fighting until the textbook issue is resolved . . . The education officers were arrogant and unsympathetic in court. The rights of students mean nothing to them.

In October 2016, Qiu Bai submitted another lawsuit application but failed.

It may be understood that the legal action Qiu Bai pursued for demanding a response from authorities on the homophobic textbook issue was her individual attempt for relational interaction with the state and the court. But what she then courageously demonstrated on social media platforms effectively mobilized and oriented relational interactions within a wider public. Her detailed exposure of the responses and non-responses of university officers and state officials and her demonstrations in the court unveiled the reality that homophobia was being enforced at the official and legal level. The legal system and the public attention served as stages for her protests, which disrupted authorities’ frontstage performance of protecting homosexual people’s rights.

Qiu Bai recruited a team of volunteers to assist her online campaigns. Her campaign adopted

abundant memes and persuasive but witty language to effectively communicate with Chinese people about the invisible suppression on LGBTQ+ identities and the huge challenge faced by Chinese LGBTQ+ people in disclosing homosexuality. Her curation of homophobic texts from university textbooks on social media was deliberately provocative. For example, a psychology textbook discusses how to self-cure homosexuality by using so-called ‘aversion therapy’. As the textbook puts it, ‘When seeing a same-sex subject and feeling excited, immediately pull the rubber band, which has been put on the wrist, in order to pinch the wrist and repress the sexually exciting feeling’. In another example, homosexual males are described in a textbook as more sexually active, while homosexual females are said to focus primarily on emotional fulfilment. In exposing these texts, Qiu Bai turns the exercise into an opportunity for education, condemning ‘fake expertise’ and ‘endorsement of male supremacy’, and forcefully revealing the top-down discrimination and ignorance of human rights of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Qiu Bai also wrote sentimentally about her personal experience of ‘being forced to come out’ and concerns about her parents’ vulnerability facing up to her homosexuality. Her frequent confession of feeling lonely, hurt, isolated, humiliated and so on encouraged sympathy and engaged with other LGBTQ+ people. Qiu Bai’s homosexuality and legal activities were reportedly exposed to her parents by her university tutors a few months after she launched the first lawsuit, in an attempt to get them to intervene. She wrote in a Weibo post,

The tutors have been cruelly hurting my parents and me . . . I wish for more tolerance in my journey to freedom and love, but I have deeply hurt my parents . . . My parents asked whether what the tutor said was true, looking despairing and tired.

Sensational details appealed to the public’s emotions, inspiring more expressions of similar stories, which facilitated other LGBTQ+ individuals’ experience of embodiment. Emotions were amplified through writing in the public domain (e.g. commenting on Qiu Bai’s posts and sharing personal stories), which, for many LGBTQ+ people, was their

first-time experience and promoted a shared sense of self-empowerment. A university lecturer decided to 'come out' to support Qiu Bai. In his article published on an NGO website (Cui, 2015), he recalled his experience of reading homophobic textbooks in preparation for a teaching certificate examination a few years previously. He wrote,

I was a victim [reading homophobic content], but I did not say anything and passed the exam . . . Qiu Bai's experience made me more aware of the gender regime in universities . . . We need more people together to promote change.

Art performance was consciously adopted by Qiu Bai and her campaign team, exemplified by her use of a cartoon character as campaign companion and the organization of 'hashtag events'. Qiu Bai asked for donations from readers for buying a Baymax costume (an animated character from the Disney superhero film *Big Hero 6*, popular in China for its sensitive, considerate and warm persona) and train tickets to Beijing (about 1500 RMB), promising that the person who forwarded her article on WeChat and generated the biggest number of 'likes' would accompany her to visit the Publishing House in Beijing while wearing the costume. A medical student from the northern city Tianjin, who generated over 600 'likes' on the WeChat message, was assigned to wear the Baymax costume (Qiu Bai, interview, 20 October 2016). Since then, the distinct cartoon character has been seen at Qiu Bai's protests on various occasions and in media reports, together with the rainbow flag and banners that read 'Educational materials must be right, homosexuals must be seen' (Kaiman, 2015). Photos of these brief protests were circulated widely on social media and they ignited meaningful interaction with the public, even though the photos were censored soon after. For Qiu Bai, the Baymax character symbolizes the desperate need of support and social care for LGBTQ+ people. Using Baymax as a companion was also a technique to attract the social gaze from the public, particularly young people.

Organizing 'hashtag events' was an artful technique frequently adopted by Qiu Bai's campaign. Hashtags were creatively exploited on social media

to establish online rituals, a form that resembled demonstrations and ceremonies taking place on the street in a traditional movement. In an event, Qiu Bai called for university students to write about their opinions, expectations and appeals on issues such as campus harassment and teachers' homophobic statements on a postcard and send the postcard to the principal. The postcard could also be 'a coming out letter to the principal', such as 'I am a girl; I fall in love with a girl; I hope to have your good wishes', as Qiu Bai suggested. Participants were suggested to also upload a photograph of the postcard to Weibo with the hashtag #MyLoveLetterToThePrincipal. On 17 May 2015, Qiu Bai launched an event to coincide with the date the General Assembly of the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from their list of mental disorders in 1990. She asked students to place a small object related to homosexuality (a LGBTQ+ brochure, a rainbow painting, a few supportive words for LGBTQ+, a print copy of the survey on homophobic textbooks, etc.) at the door of the principal's office of their universities. Participants then should upload a photo of the object to Weibo, adding hashtag #IHaveHomosexualClassmatesStopTextbookDiscrimination.

In another example, Qiu Bai staged a 'dining action', inviting a philosophy professor of her university, who made homophobic statements in a lecture, to have a conversation around LGBTQ+ rights over a meal with students in the campus. The principal of the university and the Dean of the university library were also invited to the meal. The professor and university officers failed to respond to the dining invitation. She crowdsourced money for this event, attracting the attention of the media through popular discussion on online forums such as *Zhihu* and *Douban*.⁶ In this event, Qiu Bai intended to demonstrate to society that people in power should be challenged and that university students were not passive receptors of homophobic ideas.

Both the Baymax campaign and the 'dining action' were launched through crowdfunding, and relying on this method, the young activist creatively and strategically launched over 10 events, which attracted the participation of thousands of university students. It is fair to say that Qiu Bai's campaigns

were unprecedented in their capacity to both initiate offline protests in significant locations and mobilize online interactions. She was even able to share her experience of lodging lawsuits in a number of universities. An author of a Biology textbook decided to amend the homophobic content after seeing Qiu Bai's case. He wrote to Qiu Bai to encourage her campaign (Qiu Bai, interview, 20 October 2016). On the gay network website *Blued (Dan Lan)*, the coverage on her court hearing attracted 106,000 hits.

However, with a significant number of young people participating in online discussions about Qiu Bai's campaigns, Qiu Bai and her campaign team increasingly felt pressure from the authorities. Online campaigning on social media frequently suffered from censorship. Political threats imposed on Qiu Bai's campaign team caused many members to leave during the campaign (Qiu Bai, interview, 20 October 2016). To the point of Qiu Bai's court hearing in September 2016, she has apparently attracted too much attention on Chinese social media and from international media. Chinese journalists had been able to publish certain information about her campaigns, but they were issued with a complete ban on reporting on the court hearing. Qiu Bai's persistence in court may have invited too much international attention, which presented a challenge for the Chinese government. It was reported that Qiu Bai's university tutor passed her a message from the government that warned her not to talk to any foreign reporters, but she ignored the warning (Kitchener, 2016).

In the Chinese context, where there is no mechanism for citizens to demand a response from the authorities around LGBTQ+ issues, Qiu Bai and her supporters were committed to maintaining public pressure on the authorities to provide a response. The communication and events launched on social media in the build-up to the legal milestones (i.e. the rejection lawsuit application or the court hearing) facilitated social participation, thus submitting social demands to the state. This study argues that meanings of Chinese protests lie in participants' self-perception of what really matter in their activities. What is meaningful for individuals may be related to their sensibility of moral responsibility for the society (Kleinman, 2006) and may be also related to

the self-revealing of identity. Qiu Bai devoted her campaign to bringing about new dynamics to the negotiation between the state and the society around LGBTQ+ rights. She found herself deeply engaged with LGBTQ+ communities, with which she has no previous connection. The legal resolution of the issue at stake may be immaterial for Qiu Bai. What mattered was the attention from the authorities and the public assumed by this legal process (Qiu Bai, interview, October 20, 2016). Qiu Bai revealed that interactions with the society generated a momentum that continuously informed her of personal responsibility to use her influence and continue with the campaign, regardless of the huge pressure imposed on her and her family (Qiu Bai, interview, 20 October 2016).

For individual participants, self-perception of social responsibility depends largely on their local context and the expectations of the communities they are engaged with (Kleinman, 2006). The extent to which Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals would be willing to support LGBTQ+ campaigns varies significantly. For many who provided sentimental comments on Qiu Bai's posts, experience of embodiment enables people's identity building and pursuits of a more meaningful existence. For others, activism is a distant concept that would challenge their own perception of morality.

Conclusion and discussion

This study has explored the context and dynamics of recent Chinese LGBTQ+ activism. I highlight the changing policies relating to Chinese sexual and gender minorities and the ambiguous attitude of the Chinese authorities towards them. I articulate the discriminating but evolving attitude of the Chinese public towards LGBTQ+ communities. The legacy of the Maoist era when homosexuality was stigmatized and even criminalized has impacted Chinese society for decades. While Chinese public today gradually reject pathologization of sexual and gender minorities, many of them stop short of accepting LGBTQ+ people in their personal networks. Chinese society is still a long way from attaining a more complete understanding and acceptance of sexual and gender diversity. Underlining recent LGBTQ+ contention of

Chinese youth is the sheer need to find ways of emotional expression in the context of widespread discrimination and stigmatization directed at LGBTQ+ groups in the Chinese society (Cao & Lu, 2014; Yu, 2015). The young activists, skilful in creative and artful communications on the Internet, are committed to promoting LGBTQ+ discourses that challenge the gender norms in the Chinese society and constructing the collective queer identity.

Against this political and social backdrop, the theoretical exploration of this study conceptualizes Chinese LGBTQ+ activism as relational interaction taken by LGBTQ+ individuals with other people of queer identities (ingroup members), authorities and the public. The relational interactions were facilitated by the logic of connective action on digital networks that allow individuals to personalize political messages and pursue perceived meanings of their own online interactions. Albeit often emotional, the online interactions collectively endeavour to change existing relationships that Chinese LGBTQ+ people are involved in.

The technique of art performance has been adopted by LGBTQ+ activists to effectively communicate with the public and the state for demanding respect and human rights for LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as the sheer need for changing existing relational models surrounding LGBTQ+ groups. The artful presentations are often sensational or provocative, endeavouring to attract the social gaze and mobilize participation in relational interaction. The concept of embodiment provides a useful analytical lens to view Chinese sensual experience during public interaction. Embodiment connects personal memories, emotion and experience, thus establishing subjectivity. For Chinese LGBTQ+ people, this experience facilitates moments of the self-revealing of identity. Embodiment connects the self and emotional expression during interactions on social media around controversial issues and promotes a sense of self-empowerment that is particularly meaningful for Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals at the current time. This experience often works as a mechanism that triggers Chinese people to overcome concerns about political risks in the practice of public contention.

Qiu Bai's lawsuits and campaign around issue of homophobic textbooks provide empirical details that

reveal the dynamics of relational interaction and individuals' experience of embodiment. Within a limited political space, Qiu Bai was able to continue the campaign until political suppression became too severe. The lawsuits attracted a considerable level of social attention, which maintained public pressure on the authorities to provide a response around the issue of homophobic textbooks. The emerging channel for submitting social demands to authorities, represented by Qiu Bai's case, is significant for Chinese LGBTQ+ communities in future negotiation with the state around LGBTQ+ rights.

This study has brought up a number of issues that should be addressed in future research on Chinese LGBTQ+ activism. While LGBTQ+ activism has been mostly represented by individual cases, it would be meaningful to explore how these seemingly separated cases may influence each other in relation to organizing strategies, mobilizational mechanisms, spirits and sentimentality. A notable case is that of university student Xixi (pseudonym) who, in 2017, followed Qiu Bai's instigation to sue a university press and a major e-commerce website for publishing and selling the homophobic textbooks. Three years after the lawsuit was launched, Xixi received the judge's ruling that the textbook's description of homosexuality as a psychosexual disorder 'was a matter of cognitive dissonance rather than a factual error' (P. Zhang, 2020). Xixi lost the case.

The relation between the state and the legal system should be a subject of continuous examination. While Chinese courts appear to be receptive to hearing more LGBTQ+-related cases, they are not necessarily considering the policy changes demanded by the LGBTQ+ protesters. The increased number of LGBTQ+ lawsuits being successfully launched should be further examined within the context of neoliberal governance in post-Mao China (Bao, 2018; Zhao, 2008).

This study is concerned with the perceived meanings of people engaging in activism to promote LGBTQ+ discourse. It is important to note that perceptions are embedded in particular times and places. Individual perceptions of activism evolve, and examining the development of an individual's activism trajectory would be meaningful for the

understanding of the subjectification of the LGBTQ+ identity of Chinese people. Interestingly, in an interview I conducted 2.5 years after her campaign, Qiu Bai revealed that she rejected the label of 'activist' during her campaign because 'it was too big and distant a word' for her. However, she had since changed her self-perception of her role. At this point, she was studying a Master's degree in the United Kingdom, where she encountered LGBTQ+ discourse frequently. She embraced the framework of activism and realized that what she was committed to back in China was meaningful activism (Qiu Bai, interview, 12 April 2019). Qiu Bai has started another campaign to unite Chinese students studying in the United Kingdom in the promotion of LGBTQ+ identities.

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Notes

1. For the general history of Chinese citizens going to the courts and initiating collective petitions as a means of dealing with conflicts with the authorities, see Cai (2010).
2. A few recent examples show the ambiguous attitude of Chinese officials towards releasing films with LGBTQ+ themes. While the 2017 Oscar-winning film *Moonlight* gained clearance to be screened at the Shanghai International Film Festival, another film featuring a homosexual relationship *Call Me By Your Name* was pulled from the Beijing International Film Festival in 2018 by censors. The 2018 film *Looking for Rohmer*, featuring a homosexual relationship, co-produced by China and France, surprisingly gained the approval by Chinese censors for release.
3. *Mama Rainbow* tells the stories of six gay and lesbian characters' experience of coming out to their parents. The film had been viewed over 100,000 times on China's main video websites such as Youku, Tudou and 56.com before it was removed in late 2014. Fan Popo lodged the lawsuit to request to see the documentation that justified the removal of the film from the internet. SARFT later denied possessing the documentation requested by Fan. The reason for removing the film remains unclear.
4. Although Van Zomeren focuses on how a non-activist becomes an activist, I avoid referring to all Chinese

protesters as activists. Bearing the name of activist is highly risky for Chinese people. In China, the label of activist is only proactively adopted by a tiny minority of people who are regularly committed to participating in high-risk protests and prepared to take the risk of imprisonment, as I have discussed in *Resistance in Digital China* [Book title removed to preserve anonymity].

5. Weibo refers to Sina Weibo, a Twitter-like microblogging service site in China. WeChat, known as 'weixin' in Chinese, is a mobile text and voice messaging communication service developed by Tencent in China. On top of WeChat's messaging and post-sharing functionalities, it also provides 'public accounts', which enables businesses or individuals to push feeds to subscribers.
6. *Zhihu* is a popular Chinese website where the user community can create, answer, edit and organize questions. *Douban* is popular Chinese social networking site where registered users can record and share information of books, music, films, personal diaries, culture and entertaining activities and events.

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